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DRAWING AS PROCESS:
EXPANSIVENESS THROUGH CONSTRAINT

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BFA in Studio Art

Capstone Thesis

Washington University in St. Louis

Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of drawing as a time-based practice, where the process is the core of the artwork rather than the finished product. I divide my artistic concerns into four chapters, each advancing on the previous one, to discuss my drawing practice, which allows for exploration of time and space across a wide array of media and styles of representation. I embrace impulse and intuition in the mark-making process, letting go of control while prioritizing the form of depicted figures over their image. This paper highlights the importance of my inner contradiction and how the process reflects my thought patterns, rather than simply the result. Additionally, I find affinity in the works of referenced artists and writers, including Amy Sillman, Brian Rutenberg, Steffani Jemison, and Sarah Sze, as their theories that examine the process of making are relevant to my practice. Eventually, my improvised experiments of drawing in my thesis artwork, *Geese, Why Geese?*, exemplify the features of my works that explore the boundaries between progress and product, discipline and madness, and opens new possibilities to find expansiveness through constraint.

Statement

My works germinate from the soil of my life experiences, with leaves sprouting from the fantasy of fragmented feelings. “I draw,” I tell people. As the title suggests, my art practice revolves around the universe of drawing. This universe has been built over the past years as the majority of my works are two-dimensional in formats including but not limited to drawings, paintings, illustrations, prints, and doodles—activities that are collectively named “drawing” by me. To me, drawing means using any creative agency in the hands of the artist to transcribe their mind within the composite of their internal world. In this transcription, decision-making becomes particularly vital when artists demonstrate their own methodologies. Choices can be made subconsciously with improvisation, or the artist can carefully handle each step for the most calculated outcome to their preference.

Regardless of the method, the process is the thing that matters the most in my practice because it truthfully reflects the thought patterns of the artist as documentation, rather than simply the result. This can lead the artist to further exploration of their practice. That is, process becomes the “hands” that not just carry out assigned missions, but also constantly dispatch stimulating signals back to the artist, the “mind”, for interaction. Process feeds off the artist, and vice versa. It is always this process that intrigues me the most. Therefore, my artistic practice of drawing is heavily time-based because of its instantaneity of information. The progress is also product that expresses the most emblematic features of my works, such as the discipline and madness of my internal contradiction reflected by the wide array of media and techniques, thus, the process can lead me to examine the boundary between constraint and expansiveness, across different media. Those features are emblemized by my improvised experiments of drawing in my thesis artwork, *Geese, Why Geese?*.

Chapter One

“I Draw to Think the World Out”

Drawing is my primary means of transcribing anything I see, feel, and think, and it offers a high level of flexibility for communicating my thoughts from simple sketches to advanced, finished works. American artist and writer Amy Sillman writes in her book *On Drawing*, “I can only think with a pencil in my hand, and maybe drawers are people who need to feel something in their hand while thinking the world into existence” (86). For Sillman, the combination of drawing, thinking, and feeling is inseparable when it comes to defining “drawers”—the group of artists who draw to think the world out. This categorization affirms my identity as a drawer according to Sillman, since the term drawing, indicated by different actions, creates the beginning for every free thought to be woven together.

I draw. In this paper, the term “drawing” is used in a broad sense to encompass various types of mark-making, as Sillman notes in *On Drawing*, “drawing’s procedures include so many different kinds of actions that you can attach a different verb to everyone’s drawing” (83). Sillman’s exhibition *Mostly Drawing* features works on paper with various treatments, such as



Image 1, Sillman, Amy, Works from exhibition *Mostly Drawing*, 2018, Gladstone Gallery

drawing, silk-screening, and painting (image 1). Employing contrasts between forms like color versus line and narration versus abstraction, Sillman examines drawing as a method to push her creative concerns to the boundaries of medium-handling. The subject matter depicted in this group of works is, indubitably, the term drawing itself. For me, drawing is also not limited to conventional drawing techniques: to paint with a paintbrush is to draw; to handwrite through a fountain pen is to draw; to erase using a damp paper towel is to draw; to break apart a flat surface is to draw; to stare at an object and zone out is to draw. Whether it's aimlessly letting a pencil run through a sketchbook, rubbing a scrapped canvas with vine charcoal, pressing a wet sponge



Image 2, Miao, Ciel, Wingspan, 2023, Digital drawing, 1000 x 1000 px

onto a wet painting to absorb the colors away, or tapping a tablet's screen to put a pixel within the grids (image 2), anything that involves creative agency can be considered drawing. Even sticking my wet hair onto a bathroom wall and imagining it as a composition is drawing (image 3). The possibilities for drawing are endless.

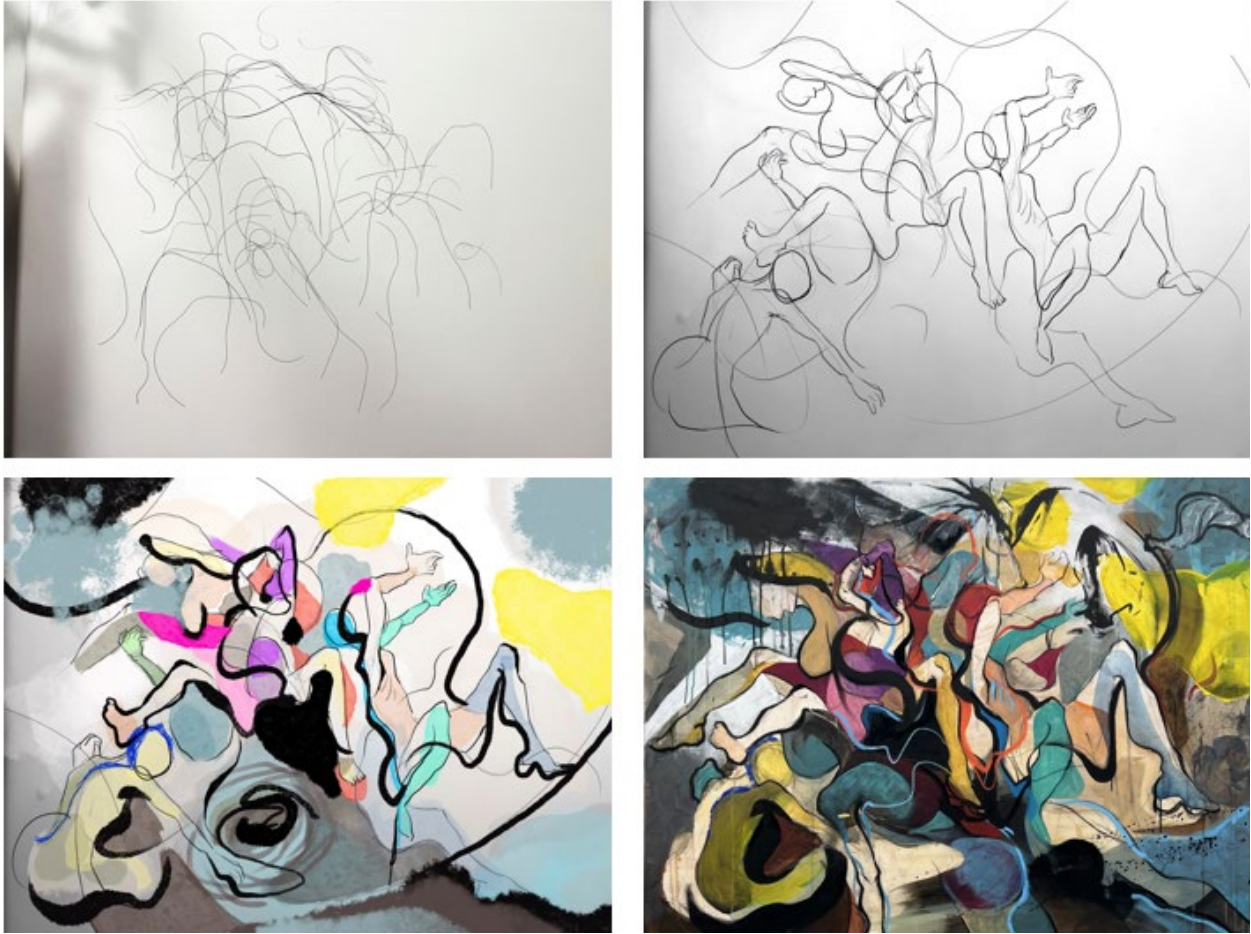


Image 3, Miao, Ciel, *Untitled*, 2022, Photograph, digital drawing, and mixed media painting on canvas, 36 x 48''

In a sense, drawing serves to capture the artist's observations and sensations, allowing them to hold onto fleeting moments from their direct experiences. By documenting these thoughts and feelings, the artist solidifies their presence as someone who watches and notices events in the world around them.

While varying in styles and medium treatments, my digital illustration *Wingspan* and painting *Untitled* inspired by my hair drawing are particularly earnest expressions of those feelings afloat in the life experience. *Wingspan* captures my impression of figures that share the common feature of having wings and loads them all into a box, unifying those images into the same format in representation. This is the process demonstrating an impression through drawing,

and the style of pixels has been chosen for its convenience at nailing down that impression using single-colored rectangular blocks. Similarly, the progression of *Untitled* tells its story from the nature of evolution in a drawing. Each stage presents a developed version based on existing images, letting the impression and feelings grow and flourish atop.

Drawing is such an exceedingly versatile method as it starts with capturing feelings and observations and thrives on experimentation with different techniques and styles. As someone who draws to explore my sensation of the world, I find the borderline between seemingly contradicted methods such as representation and abstraction begin to dwindle, blur, revealing new possibilities to me to further construct and examine the contradictions that exist across my body of works.

Chapter Two

The Hands and Mind—Controlled Chaos

The language of drawing is simple—the mind thinks and commands. The hands react. The mind receives then re-reacts to the hands' response. To draw is nothing more complicated than “I make what I think happen” with the hands and mind, and the bonds between the two will grow more rigid when the artist learns to associate the coordination as they travel across distinct techniques and media. Since my drawing practice leaps around in forms, styles, ways of representation, and subjects represented, the ability to always look above the diverse media and subjects in my artmaking is particularly essential at building my own narratives—narratives of drawing that transcend homogeneity of a single medium to integrate all kinds of thoughts together.



Image 4, Miao, Ciel, Inflorescence Series 1-5, 2022, Lithography and watercolor, 11 x 17" each

Contradictions and dichotomy have long been rich subject matter for artists. However, conflicts don't need to be resolved; I just ensure that they are stated as I expand my practice. An

instance of this explorative process arises in the mixed-media lithograph with watercolor, *Inflorescence Series 1-5* (image 4). Working with watercolor, depicting figures from nature and water itself becomes a substantial experience in absorbing then regenerating the fluidity of this wet medium among other methods—as a type of training tightening as well as balancing the connections between each action I perform on my works. *Inflorescence Series*, started as a group of prints portraying flowers that the audience find familiar in real life in diverse styles, has accidentally become an experiment searching for partners that collaborate well with lithography, and watercolor happens to be that partner. The two methods overlay with each other, creating an entirely different visual effect from just lithograph or watercolor alone—the bold, dark texture from lithograph prints is just supplemental to the translucent water marks, and this quality from overlaying was unexpected before done. This can also be seen as a way how hands and mind team up—sometimes the acknowledgement from the mind arrives later than the fact that already has been made by the hands—the concern is on “what” is being performed during this exchange between the artist and the work. This process requires time and room for incident to grow into a concrete shape then eventually becomes part of the artist’s practice.

After all, I do not see the contradiction between each medium that I handle as discordance, but rather as chaos that can be controlled through escalating informed decisions. Going deeper along this path, the time invested in infinite experimentation across media, eventually, serves to enhance my artistic memory as well as consciousness that coordinate discipline and unpredictability during artmaking. This ongoing process of observing, experimenting, and refining is the only way to yield product that reflects my vision.

Chapter Three

Progress is Product: *Tales of A Tree*

The answer is usually hidden inside the works before the right question is asked. Before realizing that it is just the process of drawing that pushed my practice forward, I was once lost in the maze of plants, like a rootless algae trying to find land. Plants, especially flowers, used to appear a lot in my works, regardless of the medium I chose, whether it was watercolor, doodling, oil, or collage. These botanical figures transform in various styles and treatments, from realistic representation to illustration, from sketch lines by pens to color blocks by a palette knife, and from a swatch of thin paints to a real leaf specimen. However, through letting another figure take dominance in the composition among plants and working with sound-based media incorporating my imagination of a tree's growing process, I have proven my hypothesis that plant's significance to me dwells within its organic shape, which grows and develops over time as a direct manifestation of the idea that "progress is product".



Image 5, Miao, *Ciel*, MOM, 2022, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48"

The production of oil painting *MOM* (image 5) accelerated the change in the role of plants in my practice by pushing them back into the secondary position while bringing the central human figure to the foreground. Unlike my *inflorescence Series*, the species of plants are not meant to be identified, with their ambiguous silhouettes and expressive outlines. While creating this piece, I allowed myself to forget about the reference photo and reality, and began to twist the texture, scale, proportion, color... every feature of those anonymous vines and flowers. Each time a certain object was pushed to the far back, something else needed to be pulled out in contrast. Through this process, the progress and product fed on each other as to infinitely generate drawings that I saw or will see on top of existing images. Plants have become a form that greedily devours the drawing marks over the image of plants I am acquainted with. “As trace, drawing appears after the fact” (150), pointed out by American contemporary artist and writer Steffani Jemison, “...Recording the coming into being of ideas, drawing are both *after* and *before*: I suppose this is why the logic of drawing can feel something like deferral, a discovery that is also a delay” (150). In my case, plants are no longer plants; they are drawings; they are the form of progress and product that look like images of plants. The fact they grow on existing images is evidence that they are drawings, just like Jemison’s statement, “a discovery that is also a delay”.

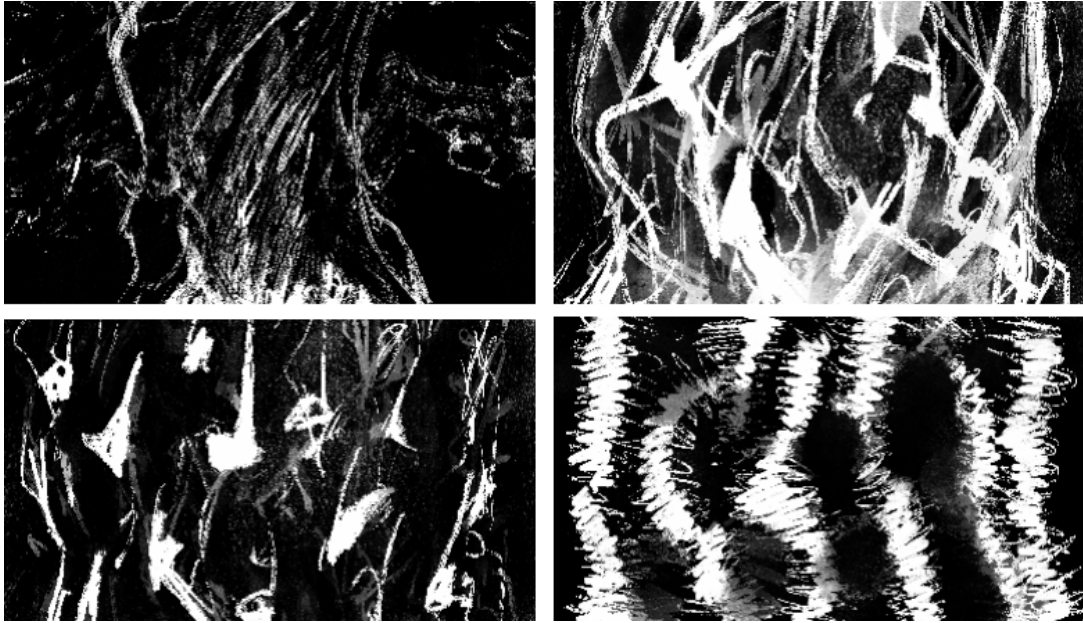


Image 6, *Miao, Ciel, Four screen captures from Tales of A Tree, Audio and Animation, 2022, 3 min 19 sec*

Slightly diverging from physical drawing, I have continued my exploration into the realm of animation with *Tales of A Tree* (image 6). The intersection of sound art, animation, and drawing is a completely new experience, or perhaps not, if I view all of them as extensions of drawing. *Tales of A Tree* is roughly divided into several parts that depict different growth phases of the tree. There are parts we see on a tree in real life and parts we do not get to see and do not know of. As the point of view shifts into the inside of the tree trunk, wrinkles on the bark begin to break apart then transform into fragmented curvy line. These lines represent my imagined “tubes” that transport a mystic energy throughout the tree’s body. Whether they exist in reality or not, animation is an incredible form of drawing whose product truthfully reflects my working progress in dynamism. Reiterating my focus in drawing, *Tales of A Tree* may tell the story of a tree, but the telling itself is bound to the ever-changing motion of my drawing, which allows room for all marks to rise and fall, to emerge and fade away, and to tighten and loosen.

Chapter Four

To Improvise: Expansiveness through Constraint



Image 7, Miao, Ciel, *Geese, Why Geese?*, 2023, Oil and dry mixed media on canvas, 72 x 118"

Geese, why geese?

On this six-foot-wide, unstretched canvas nailed to the gallery wall like a piece of drawing paper, *Geese, Why Geese?* (Image 7) audaciously announces its presence to the other world though its bold marks of charcoal, trails of dripping oil, and a multitude of figures in organic form. The traces of vine charcoal, compressed charcoal, oil pastel, colored chalk, and oil paints splash then explode over each other, enabling me to scrutinize the progression like climbing a ladder from its bottom to top while making this work. Out of all options, I have chosen to employ different types of mark-making in depicting different figures: sketch of the geese with soft vine charcoal; scrubbing white and black compressed charcoal over the central

demon's face; soft, silky touches of oil for the lone lotus blossoming in the lower corner... This self-reflexive and freedom-based practice has founded a fine line between constraint and expansiveness, as the drawing itself guides me how to progress.

Form over image. Installation artist and painter Sarah Sze pointed out in her interview *Sarah Sze: Infinite Generation* that, "The palette of images is in constant flux... We treat [images] like objects" (Neri par.41). As a painter, Sze is more concerned about to "locate the rawness of time and improvisatory quality that painting possesses" (Neri par.39). This "improvisatory quality" can be seen demonstrated in my drawings as well, where the velocity and energy are conveyed through the marks and layers of figures. Meanwhile, the intricate sketch lines reveal my intuitive thoughts that lie beneath the surface of the drawings.



Image 8, Rutenberg, Brian, *Southlight*, 2015, Oil on linen, 120 x 108"

Work beyond understanding. Abstract painter Brian Rutenberg made his *Southlight* (Image 8) solely based on his instinct for composition and coloring, drawing inspiration that mainly rises from his childhood memories. As the collision of vibrant color blocks becomes

twisted, dissected, dissolved, and gradually transitioned into each other until they cannot be separated, Rutenberg presents his audience with the essence of his indescribable experience, not as memories of the landscape, but as the experience of recalling those memories. To Rutenberg, an idea is never self-sustaining as it always needs some counterparts or other independent beings to support the essence of that very first idea. The artist and the work can be each other's counterparts. Rutenberg's perspective has aided me to comprehend my works through his angle: that works have their independence, and they speak for themselves. As the artist, I should listen to them, understand them in their current form, and then proceed.



Image 9, Miao, Ciel, Time-lapse video for progress of Geese, Why Geese?

Geese, Why Geese? This painting isn't anything but me, embodying my artistic wonders and reflections. The substrate of this canvas is treated like a drawing paper, and the multitude of layers outlines a world where chaos and discipline cohere together as the common structure. Black and white lines commence battles over each other while tinted purple and orange appear to

be somewhat complimentary to them, mediating their drastic clash. Layers of figures are overlaid, yet each asserts its own presence unveiled outside of each other's range. During the procedure, improvised performance has been pushed to the extreme with the mixed wet and dry media at my disposal. I see the drawing as a living entity—every stage (Image 9) yearns for further interaction from me to generate new parts of itself. My role is a vessel that maintains control over the composition while letting wild thoughts flow freely. This drawing is akin to telling tales of a tree—it can expand infinitely, but constraints are necessary to make that intention visible. That expansiveness is named after the artist's will, and those constraints are named after the artist's experience, mediated through the artist's hands and mind.

To Draw a Period

“I didn’t feel I had a subject.... I didn’t know why I was doing it, other than the joy and the absolute seduction of spending time in front of it”, said Sarah Sze (Neri par.7).

“I make a lot of different things...I draw”, said I. Prints, collages, paintings, illustrations, animations...altogether they form “drawing”, carving into my muscle memory, my hands and mind, and filling up my experience storehouse. From *Wingspan* to *Geese, Why Geese?*, I intentionally blur the boundaries between drawing and other creative processes, using intricate lines, layered textures, and twisted forms to formulate an ecstatic exterior world that speaks to my energetic interior consciousness. I see the process of making as the core aspect of my work rather than the sole finished product. To this end, I embrace my impulse and intuition in the mark-making process, letting go of control while maintaining the composition. In doing so, I aim to create a sense of freedom and spontaneity that reflects the memory dwelling in the coordination of my hands and mind in exploring the tenuous balance between discipline and madness, progress and product. Building on a history of experimentation, I endeavor to continue pushing the boundaries as developing new branches executing my own depiction of the temporal and spatial progression within the world of drawing.

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